

**Lessons for a Life Worth Living:
Implications for Record-Keeping by Organizations**
Owen Ambur, September 18, 2004

In his book entitled *Life's Greatest Lessons: 20 Things That Matter*, Hal Urban suggests “too many of us never fully develop because of influences in our environment... We get blitzed with too many messages that don't have anything to do with real success. We're urged to look for the quick fix rather than to look inside at our own resources.”

In *A Life Worth Living: The 9 Essentials*, Barrie Sanford Greiff focuses beyond the realm of the quick fixes of today, to the enduring success of generations to come, as he asks, “Why do we not bequeath what is most precious to us – not only what we have earned, but also what we have learned?” He notes that for nearly a thousand years, since the year 1050, people have drawn up *ethical wills* containing expressions of moral and ethical values to be conveyed to the next generation after their deaths. (p. xxiii) Greiff suggests we need to pass on to our inheritors an understanding of eight themes, each of which is characterized by a word beginning with the letter L. Among them are the need to:

- *learn*, to explore, search and grow so as to adapt to novel situations;
- *labor*, to create meaning and value in the work we do every day;
- *link*, by creating a number of sustaining connections with others in weaving the tapestries of our lives;
- *live*, in appreciating the cycles of life as they revolve around us and we around them;
- *lead*, by taking risks that define our lives.

Collectively, Greiff says the eight L's constitute the ninth L – our *legacy*. (p. xxxiv) And he asks, “if we are able to absorb legacies simply by being around other people and distilling their messages, wouldn't our own legacies become that much richer if we passed on our specific stories ... The legacy we build and leave revolves around a central belief that our lives have stood for something – that we've been asked the tough questions and somehow managed to survive, and in many cases, thrive.” (p. 8)

As we live and labor, any meaning and values we create must be recorded in order to be enduring, widely shared, and appropriately linked to other meanings and values. The risks associated with leadership can only be minimized by taking full advantage of the lessons previously learned and shared in high-quality records. Contrary to the presently prevalent predilection for fast, facile fixes and false progress, Urban says truly successful people, many of whom might be considered to be leaders:

- accept life as it is, with all its difficulties. They adapt rather than complain about it. They accept responsibility for their own lives instead of blaming or making excuses.

- have a sense of direction and purpose – they know where they are going. They set goals, accomplish them, and then set new goals.
- are action-oriented. They get things done because they're not afraid of hard work, and they don't waste time.
- maintain high standards in their personal conduct. They know that honesty is one of the main ingredients in the character of a person. They are consistently truthful in both their private and public lives. (pp. 5 & 6)

On the latter point, Urban's view is in apparent conflict with those of Charles Ford, who says everybody lies and the only distinction is a matter of degree.¹ One way to reconcile the two points of view is to presume that by use of the word "consistently" Urban means more often than not and that he means successful people are truthful when dishonesty would be hurtful to others. However, one way or another, it seems that both Urban and Ford might agree that to be "successful" means creating a record of which one can truly and truthfully be proud.

Urban says, "reality is a great teacher. It helps us learn, although often slowly and painfully, some of life's most valuable lessons. One of them is this: *The world will not devote itself to making us happy.*" (p. 9) While that may be a rude awakening to some, Urban observes, "If we don't understand and accept life as it is, we'll keep wishing for something else and never get it." On the other hand, he suggests, "once we understand that the world won't devote itself to making us happy, we begin to accept that responsibility for ourselves." (pp. 9 & 10)

In politics it has been said that "perception is reality." However, it is well known that perceptions can be deceiving. Greiff observes, "Sometimes we distort what we perceive, and learn what we distort, and in the process fool ourselves. It's important to understand how we know what we know, and to have the flexibility to 'unlearn'." (p. 58)

It is doubtful that misperception is the kind of teacher to which Urban is referring. If that were the case, any old lesson would do and it would not be particularly valuable. Both accepting responsibility for ourselves as well as perceiving reality as it actually exists require thoughtful reflection, focusing on the record of one's own actions and the results they beget, as well as the actions taken and results generated by others. Lacking reliable evidence to which careful attention can be paid, the risk of misperceptions, the failings of human memory, the psychology of deceit, and the tendency toward irrational thought all converge to render slim the possibility of real learning of truly valuable lessons.²

¹ For more on Ford's views on the psychology of deceit, see <http://ambur.net/Lies.htm>.

² For information on the failings of human memory, the psychology of deceit, and the prevalence of irrationality, respectively, see <http://ambur.net/memoriesins.pdf>, <http://ambur.net/Lies.htm> and <http://ambur.net/irrationality.htm>.

Urban says people who are “failures” endeavor either to avoid problems or to “work around” them. On the other hand, he suggests successful people accept problems and work *through* them, even when it involves suffering. Moreover, he argues ***the process of meeting problems head-on and looking for solutions gives life meaning.*** (p. 11, emphasis added)

Greiff observes that a life well lived is characterized by risk-taking, but that risk is not synonymous with uncertainty. He lists four guidelines with respect to our attitudes toward taking chances: 1) we prefer a certain outcome to a gamble; 2) we prefer to minimize risk rather than chance a gain; 3) we will assume some risk to avoid a loss; and 4) we tend to compartmentalize when we take risks and, by creating silos in our thinking, we may fail to draw important connections. Moreover, he notes that many of us overestimate risk in proportion to the reality of the circumstances involved. (pp. 143 & 144)

While avoiding Urban’s binary classification of people either as “failures” or “successes,” Dorner suggests that we all tend to “court failure” in predictable ways but that those who are relatively poorer decision-makers tend to do less reality checking.³ In short, as Urban suggests, poor decision-makers tend to ignore evidence that is contrary to their preconceived notions and to try to work around problems that should instead either be confronted and resolved or accepted as facts of life.

“Once we accept the fact that life is hard,” Urban says, “we begin to grow. We begin to understand that every problem is also an opportunity... We begin to accept the challenges of life. Instead of letting our hardships defeat us, we welcome them as a test of character... At the same time,” he notes, “we need to understand that society bombards us daily with messages that are quite the opposite... we’re told over and over that there’s a quick and easy way to do just about everything...” Moreover, Urban adds, “Those ads are all around us because the people in advertising and marketing have a good understanding of human behavior. They know that most people *don’t* accept that life is hard and will continue to look for the quick and easy way instead.” (p. 12)

On the other hand, Urban suggests, “The most important thing we can do when we’re hurting, whether it’s physical or emotional hurt, is to find some meaning in it. Pain does teach us something, but we have to be willing to learn from it.” (p. 13) However, he quotes Thomas Merton as saying, “*The truth never becomes clear as long as we assume that each one of us, individually, is the center of the universe.*” (p. 71) Unfortunately, however, Urban observes the unpleasant fact is that we are all self-centered. In looking out for ourselves, he says we often confuse reality with our limited perception of it. (p. 72)

Without clear evidence to help us overcome our natural limitations, what other results might we expect? Besides helping us sort out discrepancies between our perceptions and reality, reliable records also assist us in de-centering ourselves by shifting the focus to actual, objective, repeatable evidence as best it can be accumulated.

³ For more on Dorner’s views on the logic of failure, see <http://ambur.net/failure.pdf>.

Urban says “honesty is still the best policy” and that “you’ll never be truly successful unless everything you do is undergirded with honesty and integrity. You’ll never know peace of mind and you’ll never enjoy feelings of self-worth unless truthfulness is deeply embedded in your character.” (p. 75) “Sadly,” however, he observes, “we’re surrounded by all forms of dishonesty.” Even more sad, he says, is the fact that “seeing what we can ‘get away with’ has practically become a sport. Being able to ‘pull off’ something is often considered an achievement, a feat worth openly bragging about.” (p. 77)

Perhaps that is not surprising, because, as Urban notes, “... honesty [is] hard work. It requires more time, thought, and energy than we’re sometimes willing to expend.” Thus, he says we often choose expediency over integrity, buy into the thought that “everybody’s doing it” and developing “a shortcut philosophy of life. Without realizing it,” he suggests, “we become morally lazy” because it is “easier and quicker to be dishonest.” (p. 78)

Moreover, he observes, “One dishonest act leads to another. Rarely does a person lie, cheat, or steal one time. If something is gained from it, the temptation to do it again is almost irresistible. Then there’s the need to cover the trail, and another dishonest act is used to do it. If the process continues, dishonesty becomes almost a way of life. In other words, a habit ...” (p. 79)

Interestingly, honesty is not among the “seven habits of highly effective people” expressly enumerated by Stephen Covey in his famous book by that title. However, he does cite honesty as an example of the sort of principles that “create the foundation of trust which is essential to cooperation and long-term personal and interpersonal growth.” (p. 34)

Covey defines honesty as “telling the truth ... *conforming our words to reality*.” He says integrity is a broader concept that includes but goes beyond honesty by *conforming reality to our words* – in other words, keeping promises and fulfilling expectations.” (pp. 197 & 198)

By Covey’s definition, in comparison to personal integrity, personal honesty would seem to be a relatively easy habit to cultivate. The fact that honesty seems to be relatively rare suggests that we as human beings may naturally prefer another course of action, in which case it is understandable if we prefer not to have our intents and actions fully and accurately documented.

That hypothesis is strengthened by research Urban cites suggesting that the effort required to sustain a false intention places great stress on the body’s nervous system. (p. 80) Honesty may require hard work, but unless and until we develop the discipline to be really good at it, dishonesty apparently requires even more effort. Moreover, Urban suggests, “One of the most rewarding things in life is to discover our potential for personal fulfillment, and then grow into it.” Yet, he notes we cannot do so if we fall into dishonest habits. (p. 81)

Using terms similar to Covey’s, Urban says, “If dishonesty ruins relationships, honesty cements them. The most essential ingredient of a good relationship is trust.” (p. 82) With respect to the psychology of deceit, Ford says the most important lesson to be learned is how we use lies to

others to deceive ourselves.⁴ Perhaps it is precisely because we don't trust ourselves that we prefer not to have good and readily accessible records. However, Urban argues, "We need to be honest, not because of what might happen to us when we're not, but because of what happens inside of us when we are." (p. 83)

Urban suggests that one of the best investments we can make is to invest time to sit down, think, and write out a list of goals. He says that seeing them on paper is the first step toward turning them into reality. Our goals should be as specific as possible and deadlines should be associated with each of them. The more precisely our goals are described, he says, the more our minds will be drawn to them and the more precisely we record them, the clearer the path to achieve them becomes. (pp. 104 & 105)

Urban observes that in the 1950s the message was clear that success is something that must be earned, but nowadays the media inundates us with a message that's just the opposite: "There's a quick and easy way to get everything we want... we don't have to work, wait, struggle, or make any sacrifice. We can do [whatever we want] within a matter of days and without the slightest effort... Unfortunately, if we hear things often enough, we begin to believe them. And too many people, of all ages, have bought into this phony formula for success... They focus on consuming rather than producing. They focus on short-term pleasure rather than long-term satisfaction." (pp. 112 & 113)

Toward the achievement of long-term satisfaction, Urban suggests self-discipline is one of the most positive aspects we can have. By self-discipline, he means training ourselves to get things done, developing a plan of achievement, committing ourselves to it, and then following through. He says it can also be considered to be self-determination, since when we practice it, we realize we're in control of our own lives. We alone determine what we'll accomplish and when. In short, we alone decide what we'll make of our lives. "Unfortunately," he says, "self-discipline means being in charge of yourself." The definition of *self-discipline* he prefers is ... "getting yourself to do something, even though you don't feel like doing it, because the reward for getting it done far exceeds the temporary unpleasantness of the task itself." (p. 116)

In the "land of the free and the home of the brave," it seems slightly strange that Urban would use the word "unfortunately" to qualify the thought that self-discipline means "being in charge of yourself." However, his use of that term highlights the fact that many and perhaps most, if not all of us prefer to leave others in charge of our fate at least some, if not much of the time.⁵ If honesty is the best policy, in all honesty we may prefer to leave it to others to act on our behalf, while downplaying or ignoring the record of our own inaction. Indeed, if being in charge of ourselves takes discipline and hard work, making and appropriately sharing records of our actions and results takes even more.

⁴ For more on Ford's views on the psychology of deceit, see <http://ambur.net/Lies.htm>.

⁵ Connors, Smith, and Hickman suggest the American character is in crisis, in large measure, due to the *cult of victimization*, which has been defined as: "an odd combination of ducking responsibility and telling everyone else what to do." See <http://ambur.net/oz.htm>.

Urban suggests, “The most important step is to develop a new way of looking at time. We need to view it as a resource... it can be put to good use or it can be wasted. But there’s one big difference between this resource and others: we can’t save it, store it up, stockpile, or hoard it. We can’t turn it on or off, and we can’t replace it. We’re forced to spend it minute by minute. And once we spend it, we can’t retrieve it. That’s why the way we spend our time is the way we measure the quality of our lives. Time *is* life.” (p. 124)

And if time is life, the measure of its quality is the legacy we leave in terms of the record we create by the actions we take in the use of our limited time on earth. As Greiff puts it: “Some things cannot be relived; we cannot control the calendar; we need to grab our special moments, because excuses will come back to haunt us. We must also take the time here and now to consider our legacies, consider what we hold most important, and tell them to the next generation.” (p. xxxviii)

Besides the benefits to future generations, Urban argues that we can only feel good about ourselves when our behavior is positive and we can be fully accountable for it. (p. 136) Epstein and Birchard say that leading corporate managers welcome accountability are “setting an example by behaving with candor, trust, and openness... [and] making decisions objectively based on hard data.”⁶ Taking into account the fallibility of human memory and the number of acts and relationships in which each of us is routinely engaged, there is no way that we can truly and fully be accountable without “hard data” – which is to say good and complete records – particularly with respect to our business affairs.

Urban says we shouldn’t passively wait for others to praise us in order to make us to feel good. Rather, we should *do* things that make us feel good about ourselves even if others fail to notice, much less applaud us. (p. 137) Indeed, as Urban observes, “Real self-esteem is a by-product. Feeling good about ourselves is the natural result of doing the right things and thinking the right thoughts.” (p. 138) More specifically speaking, real self-esteem comes from the act of creating a record of which we can truly and truthfully be proud.

Urban avers, “The more we get caught up in the incredibly fast pace and conveniences of modern life, the less we take time to think.” Greiff suggests, “The period of doing nothing is as crucial as the period of doing something. Reflection is a necessary prelude to effective action ...” (p. 47) Norman makes a similar point in lamenting our apparent preference for *experiential* versus *reflective* thought, and he suggests, the greatest peril is that of “experiencing when one should be reflecting ... where entertainment takes precedence over thought.”⁷

Urban observes that it is easier to let electronic devices do our thinking for us and, thus, “we end

⁶ For more on Epstein and Birchard’s views on corporate accountability, see <http://ambur.net/counting.htm>.

⁷ For more on Norman’s views on things that make us smart, see <http://ambur.net/smart.htm>.

up wondering how to make sense out of life.” (p. 142) Greiff addresses the paradox of plenty and technology as follows:

... in a land where we own more than ever before, many feel more deprived. Where we make more use than ever of labor-saving devices, many of us feel increasingly harried and unable to relax. In a country where more people than ever remain eager to stuff insights into other people’s minds, many feel under greater stress. While technology instantly puts facts at our fingertips, we feel less secure in making decisions. In a computer connected society, many feel more disconnected. (p. 98)

No doubt, much of the information that is now instantly at our finger tips is indeed factual in nature. However, a significant part of the reason we feel less secure about making decisions is the fact that the quality, reliability, authenticity, and usability of that information is often suspect. Those are the attributes of a “record” as set forth in ISO 15489. The fact much of the information foisted upon us lacks such attributes inevitably creates uncertainty, and stress flows naturally from uncertainty.

Consistent with that thought, Urban says the bottom line is that we make two important choices regarding our minds: 1) what we let into them and 2) how we use them. (p. 145) If our own entertainment is the predominant in point in our perceptions and thought patterns, perhaps it should not be surprising if we fail to produce significant results of persistent, purposeful value. And if we fail to document and reflect upon the record of our actions and the results they beget, perhaps it should not be surprising if we continue to fail or, at least, not to glean as much success as we might.

Urban concludes: “It isn’t *whether* we fail that matters; it’s *how* we fail. The difference between people who succeed in life and the ones who don’t isn’t found in the number of times they fail. It’s found in what they do *after* they fail.” Greiff extends that thought to suggest our net worth is more than the sum of our assets less our liabilities. Instead, he suggests it includes “how we lived our lives, the contributions we made, and what mattered most to us.” Those who ultimately succeed in life are those who carefully assemble and reflect upon the records of their own actions and the results they generate for ourselves or others.